

Sting hails a new era

On the surface, Sting's victory in the National Wrestling Alliance's version of the world heavyweight title Saturday night was the completion of the ultimate comeback story with a happy ending.

But beneath the surface, it is the beginning of a new story and a new era in the nation's second largest wrestling promotion.

In just his second match back after major knee surgery, Sting ended Ric Flair's reign as standard-bearer of the NWA with an inside cradle in 16:05. When ref Nick Patrick hit the mat for the third time, it brought forth an explosion of cheers and fireworks at the Great American Bash pay-per-view show from the Baltimore Arena.

The win puts Sting in the driver's seat as well as the hot seat in the NWA. As champion, Sting, 31, becomes the standard-bearer for the promotion. There will be attempts to market him as a celebrity to non-wrestling fans, as the rival World Wrestling Federation did to make Hulk Hogan the biggest draw in history.

Inside the ring, he'll be put under the wrestling microscope. His matches will be judged against the standard set by Flair, who became champion in 1981 and has, with a few interruptions, held it ever since. "Ric Flair is the greatest world champion of all time," Sting said. "Words can't describe him. People have to believe me when I say that I've got some big shoes to fill."

Maybe even less enviable is being the main drawing card for a promotion that has been foundering at the gate. Even with the storyline of the promotion's most popular wrestler making a comeback after knee surgery and going for the title against Flair, the Baltimore Arena didn't sell out for the match.

Sting also will be under pressure to become a crossover national attraction (to have drawing power among more than just hard-core wrestling fans) in a company that has yet to produce one. And there are still question marks regarding his knee.

He credits his bodybuilding background with what was legitimately a remarkable recovery.

"I started doing therapy right after the surgery," he said. "The mind-to-muscle concentration I understood after years of bodybuilding sped up the recovery. On TV I credited Lex [Luger, an NWA wrestler who is Sting's business partner in a Gold's Gym in Atlanta] with pushing me in training and it's really true."



**GRUNT
AND
GRIN**

BY DAVE MELTZER
FOR THE NATIONAL

FILE: The undercard match on the Bash special in which the Midnight Express beat The Southern Boys was thought by many ringsiders to be the best match in the United States in 1990. . . . The career of WWF star Brutus (The Barber) Beefcake appears to be in jeopardy after a July 4 boating accident. Beefcake suffered a crushed skull in the accident and had 12 plates put in his head. Preliminary indications are his recovery time will be 18 months minimum.

Chad -
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